

Verdict brings cheers, relief for students at Winnacunnet High

By Kathie Neff
Eagle-Tribune Writer

At Winnacunnet High School, it has been a year where events like the annual lip-synce assembly and preparations for May's junior prom have been overshadowed by talk of murder.

And where no one could quite forget that four of their classmates were missing at football games and parties because they were in jail.

Yesterday, when Principal Roberta Newman announced over the school intercom that former media director Pamela Smart had been found guilty of murder-related charges because of their classmates' testimony, teenagers yelled, cheered and cried.

"I ran down the hall screaming," said Kristen Smith, 16, who is in the 11th grade — as Bill Flynn would have been if he had not been arrested. "I think it's going to lift a lot off our school now."

Bill, now 17, was Mrs. Smart's lover and the admitted triggerman in the sex-for-murder slaying of her husband, Gregory. He and two friends testified against Mrs. Smart, 23, who was charged with conspiracy to murder, accomplice to murder and witness-tampering. The three pleaded guilty to lesser charges and await sentencing. A fourth boy has yet to be tried.

Yesterday's verdict brought a sense of both vindication and relief to Seabrook, N.H., the seacoast community home to the four boys — and that was the brunt of jokes even before the murder because of its close-knit, working-class character.

"I thought of Bill," said Jennifer French, 16, who was Bill's girlfriend in eighth grade. "I just thought, this is good. I'm glad he's not the only one getting blamed for it since it was her (Mrs. Smart's) idea."

The case kept "Brookers" glued to their televisions during the two-week trial. At the Lee house on River Street, as in many Seabrook homes, family members watched videotapes of the testimony every night after dinner.

"My mother taped it while we were in school," said Kerri Lee, 13. "I knew all the boys, and I knew Cecelia Pierce (another teenage witness at the trial). She lived down the street from me all her life until she moved uptown two years ago. We watched every night. My grandmother even came over."

Both Kerri and her sister, Kelli, 17, said they were pleased with the verdict — though they had feared Mrs. Smart would be found innocent. "I watched her during the verdict," Kelli said of Mrs. Smart. "She didn't move once. She's amazing. She's like Charles Manson."

Kristen Smith said Mrs. Smart was liked by most students but "Bill just acted really weird after he met her. I think he just made a mistake. He was so in love with her, he made a mistake. I don't think he should be in jail, myself."

She said the highly publicized crime "affected all of our lives."

"Everywhere you go, if you're from Seabrook and you go to Winnacunnet, people always start asking questions — 'Did you know the boys, the murderers,'" she said. "They treat us strange anyway because we're from Seabrook."

But students from nearby Hampton said they were also bothered by the stigma.

Juniors Alicia Preston and Cary Lord were in a peer leadership program last year with Mrs. Smart and Bill, and both said they are relieved the trial is over.

"I've never done drugs, I've never committed a crime, and I'm from Winnacunnet," said Miss Preston, 17.

The last time they saw Mrs. Smart was two days before her arrest, when rumors of her involvement in her husband's murder were at their peak.

She approached them on Hampton Beach and begged them not to believe what they were hearing.

Kristen said the case has affected her in more personal ways. "I know them boys," she said, "and I'm never going to see them again."

Reporter Hilde Hartnett also contributed to this story



Eagle-Tribune photo by Marc McGeehan

Ready for verdict: Pamela Smart returns to the courtroom.

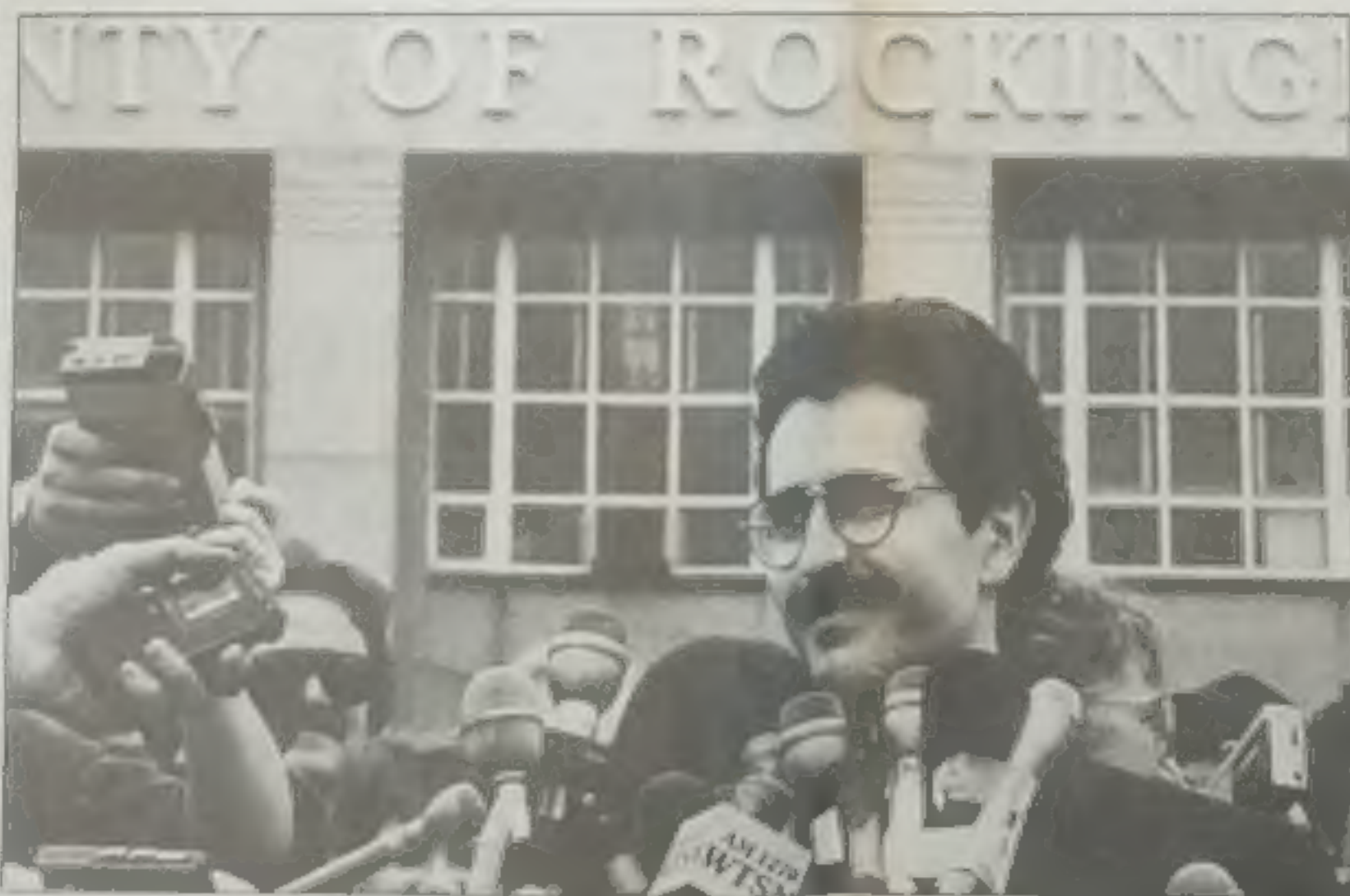


Happy prosecutor: Diane Nicolosi, who grew up in Methuen, talks to reporters.
Eagle-Tribune photo by Marc Halevi



AP Photo

Graveside: William Smart hugs a relative at his murdered son's grave after the trial.



Eagle-Tribune photo by Marc McGeehan

Beaming: Assistant Attorney General Paul Maggiotto after Pamela Smart is declared guilty.

Superintendent: Now we can go on with life

James Weiss could not hear the high school students cheering when the verdict in Pamela Smart's trial was announced.

But the superintendent of Winnacunnet Regional School District shared their relief.

"The feeling is hopeful that now, maybe, we can go on with life," he said.

The last year — his first as superintendent — has been a trying one for him and students.

Two high school youths died in accidents. War broke out

abroad and a recession hit home. Mrs. Smart, the district's media coordinator, was arrested in her office and convicted of conspiring with students in the murder of her husband.

"The circumstances are incredible," Dr. Weiss said, noting that special counseling services were offered to students and staff following each traumatic event. All this during what is supposed to be "the best years of (students') lives," he said.

But now, Dr. Weiss is hoping

things will return to normal.

Cecelia Pierce, a 16-year-old student who was Mrs. Smart's former confidante and the prosecution's star witness, is somewhat of a celebrity, but is back attending classes.

Mrs. Smart's job, which paid \$26,000 a year, has not been filled. Administrators plan to give her successor different responsibilities.

Yesterday, classes went on after the verdict was announced to students. "We continued with education, but it may have been refocused," Dr. Weiss said.

— Hilde Hartnett



Distracted: Pamela Smart's aunt (left) and cousin react to the guilty verdict.
Eagle-Tribune photo by Marc McGeehan